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ABSTRACT

Despite its rapid rise as leader of the religious broadcasting industry, Jim Bakker's "PTL Club" (People That Love) has experienced numerous financial problems. In 1979, three former PTL vice-presidents charged that the club was diverting thousands of dollars in donations for missionary projects to the club's general fund to pay bills. The subsequent Federal Communications Commission (FCC) investigation shifted Bakker's role from evangelist to Chairman of the Board, and his relationship with his congregation from that of shepherd and flock to that of executive and stockholders. Nonetheless, Bakker attempted to divert his followers' attention by repeatedly denouncing the press, the FCC, and the government from the pulpit (citing religious persecution), and by persuading his congregation to dismiss the allegations and concentrate instead upon their role as Bakker's partners in defending the Faith. With his unethical but successful rhetorical strategy, Bakker appears to be creating a closed society as a leader possessing ultimate power and control over a group of fiercely devoted followers with a common enemy--any person opposing his ministry. However, his persuasive strategy may diminish the credibility of other ministries, having already lost the endorsement of many notable Christian leaders. (HTH)

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"RUBBING THE DEVIL'S NOSE IN IT:"

PTL'S JIM BAKKER UNDER INVESTIGATION

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In 1976 Jim Bakker hosted a telethon for an amaturish Christian talk show in Charlotte called "Praise the Lord." Bakker's success prompted an offer to remain as regular host. Renamed "The PTL Club," an ungrammatic acronym for People that Love, the program was transformed into a slickly packaged Christian copy of the "Tonight Show" with Bakker assuming Johnny Carson's role and chubby cohost Henry Harrison playing Ed McMahn. Under Bakker's leadership, the PTL Television Network was established and production moved from a one-time furniture warehouse to Heritage Village, a three building complex housing modern broadcast facilities. Today "The PTL Club" is seen on over 235 television stations in the United States and Canada, and the PTL Television Network beams religious programming around the world twenty-four hours a day via its own satellite.

Despite its meteoric rise to undisputed leader of the Electric Church, PTL has experienced numerous problems. Since Bakker's emergence as president and media star the "organization has found itself in an almost constant swirl of controversy."[1] PTL's greatest problems have been financial, operating at times over $13 million in debt. The network has been pursued by creditors, unable to pay wages on time, and forced to halt construction of Heritage USA, a multi-million dollar Christian theme park in nearby York, South Carolina. The organization's rapid growth and its inability to keep pace on an administrative level has lead to PTL's most recent and serious controversy: the FCC investigation to determine whether PTL solicited money for specific foreign mission projects and subsequently used the money to meet its own financial needs.

In this paper I will provide a brief account of the controversy, examine Jim Bakker's rhetorical strategy, and assess the ethics of Bakker's persuasion.

In January 1979 three former vice-presidents of PTL, frustrated in their attempts to convince Jim Bakker to change "a pattern of deception plaguing the ministry," decided to "answer (The Charlotte) Observer's questions and publicize ills permeating PTL. . ."[2] Roger Flessing, Bill Perkins, and Robert Manzano contend the PTL Television Network "ignored written instructions that thousands of donors enclosed with their contributions--instructions stipulating their money be used for missionary projects in Korea and Cyprus. . . at least $337,000. . . was diverted to PTL's general fund and was used, in most cases, to pay bills."[3] Two months following the revelation, the Observer reported the beginning of an FCC investigation which is still in progress. The hearings have concluded and a judgment is expected later this year.

Analyzing Bakker's rhetorical strategy under investigation, the critic needs to keep three considerations in mind: first, Jim Bakker is PTL; second, his rhetoric is directed toward a closed audience of thousands of PTL Partners (contributors); and third, the FCC's inquiry moves the focus on PTL from an evangelistic ministry to the corporate realm of Big Business.

Jim Bakker is the heart and, forgive me, soul of PTL. The boyish-looking forty-year-old evangelist-executive designed each cross-shaped, colonial-style building down to the color of the carpets at the Heritage Village broadcast studios. At Heritage USA, Bakker "participates in almost every conceivable aspect of construction and planning--deciding, for example, exactly which trees to preserve as roadways are carved through clusters of pine."[4] Jim Bakker rules PTL with an iron hand. Remaining aloof from his associates, Bakker demotes or banishes from the ministry those vice-presidents or workers who disagree with him too often. Bakker recently had his contract rewritten stiuplating that PTL's Board of Directors could not remove him unless he's convicted of a crime."[5]

A master of the television medium, Jim Bakker enjoys a popularity with his studio and home audiences rivaling even the most solidly entrenched soap opera stars. Roger Flessing calls him "an incredible pro," explaining:

> . . . television despite the masses it can reach. . . is essentially a one-on-one medium. Good performers don't think of the millions watching. Instead, they imagine a single viewer--a willing, one-way partner in an intimate conversation.
>
> Bakker's a master at such communication. He works at it, and even in the grip of the Holy Spirit, he rarely indulges his considerable abilities as a fire-and-brimstone, tent revival preacher. He's as cool as his medium--relying on his instincts, religious philosophy and some conscious calculation on the art of winning souls.[6]

Bakker and his bubbly wife Tammy Faye--a gospel singer with a terminal case of cute who admittedly wears too much makeup, dresses too frivously, and cries too easily--are a dynamic couple who inspire loyalty. They are enthusiastic, warm, appealing, and when they cry in the Spirit, contributions from PTL Partners increase dramatically. Bakker's subpoened appearance at FCC hearings in Washington, proved, to his displeasure, a not too surprising axiom: when Jim Bakker isn't hosting "The PTL Club," donations drop. As Bakker explains, "people respond to the minister."[7]

Bakker's audience is composed primarily of white middle and upper-class Christians "whose pledges support the ministry with more than $1 million a week."[8] Over 200,000 Partners come each year from all over the United States to sit in the television audience at Heritage Village, vacation at Heritage USA, or spend their entire summer as PTL volunteers. A license-plate check outside the Heritage Village studios indicates visitors from Maryland, Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, Ohio, North Dakota, Michigan, New York, Louisiana, Virginia, and the Carolinas. At Heritage USA, Partners dine in the Wagon Wheel cafeteria, rent camp sites and chalets, attend religious seminars and entertainments, shop for PTL souvenirs, take guided tours, rent bikes, swim, play tennis,

volleyball, softball, Ping Pong, billiards, and pinball. However, the main attraction for the Partners is the chance to see and perhaps talk with Jim Bakker.

As president of a corporation under investigation by the FCC, Bakker's role shifts from evangelist to Chairman of the Board. Correspondingly, Bakker's relationship with the Partners is altered from that of shepherd and flock to executive and stockholders. As head of the PTL Television Network, Jim Bakker is responsible for informing the Partners of the administrative policies prompting the FCC investigation. Rather than doing so in a forthright manner, examination reveals Bakker has relied upon stratagems of diversion and deception in appraising the Partners of PTL's fiscal operations.

Jim Bakker has attempted to divert the attention of the Partners from PTL's alleged misuse of earmarked donations by advancing several defenses of doubtful relevance. Launching his own offensive, Bakker has carried the attack to his perceived adversaries by repeatedly denouncing the press and the FCC. He blames The Charlotte Observer for the FCC probe, declaring:

> There is no wrongdoing at PTL. . ..There are the lies that have been written about us. The lies have been propagated by the enemies of the ministry and one media source. It's been a trumped-up situation brought on because of newspaper articles written about this ministry.[9]

In a fashion reminiscent of demagogues Joseph McCarthy and Sockless Jerry Simpson, Bakker claims he has "documents from inside sources at (The Charlotte Observer) proving it intends to destroy PTL."[10] And similar to McCarthy and Sockless Jerry, Bakker refuses to make these documents public.

Bakker also accuses the government for PTL's woes. During an hour-long documentary entitled "Under Investigation," in which PTL investigated itself, FCC official Allen Ginsburg was quoted as vowing, "We're going to get you."[11] Ginsburg denies the comment, but the quote, supposedly directed to a PTL attorney, appeared

in bold type across newspaper advertisements. Promising later to detail the harassment he's suffered from the government, Bakker claims, "It's a conspiracy. . . . I've watched it for six months. I know what's going on. The government, I don't think, wants to take on Christianity and freedom of Speech. It's a trick only the enemy of us all could mastermind."[12] Ah yes, the Devil--the ultimate scapegoat. This comment is indicative of Bakker's refusal to discuss PTL's alleged fiscal policies as a corporate leader, choosing instead to address the issue as a pulpiteer.

Addressing the controversy as an evangelist, Bakker has attempted to divert the Partner's attention from PTL's tenuous position of denying the allegations in question by shifting ground to a defense of religious freedom. Charging the FCC with launching "a major assault against the constitutional rights of PTL," Bakker released a statement which in part said:

> Arriving unannounced, FCC agents made impossible demands upon this religious organization. . . . the agents demanded internal records which are protected by constitutional guarantees of religious freedom.[13]

Bakker effectively developed this diversion in the closing moments of the "Under Investigation" television special. Appearing on the screen, a portrait of Christ over his left shoulder, and with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" playing softly in the background, Jim Bakker said,

> While I am naturally concerned about PTL, I am more concerned about the individual's rights and freedoms to worship God as they please without the government telling them what they can and cannot do. If the government can intimidate our ministry, the same thing can happen to any church in this country. If we are wrong in anything that we have done we will stand the consequences. But we are clearly not wrong and what we want is what every American wants, the right to worship our God as we want to do. We do not want this church or any other church destroyed or intimidated by the government.[14]

Of greater significance than his use of diversions, Bakker has resorted to half-truths and lies as a stratagem to deceive the Partners. PTL met its

mission commitments to Asia and the Middle-East, but not until after news of the alleged misuse of donations was made public. Bakker has steadfastly contended PTL planned to fulfill its mission pledges, but was under no time limit to do so. One tie casts doubt upon this defense and is potentially damaging to PTL's case. On December 5, 1979, Bakker told reporters, "We have never stopped designating funds, to my knowledge."[15] But sources close to the FCC say the federal agency has been told that for at least two months in 1978, PTL stopped keeping track of financial designations, simply depositing all contributions in its general fund. An internal PTL memorandum dated October 9, 1978, alleges Bill Moore, PTL's top financial officer at the time, was asked to leave the PTL ministry for reasons which have never been make public. Moore refuses to comment on the matter.

PTL has also manipulated the truth to enhance its credibility with the Partners. Wishing the Partners to identify the organization with famous Christians who, of course, would never condone the misappropriation of mission gifts, Bakker advertised the following guest appearances on the "Under Investigation" television special: Pat Boone, Oral Roberts, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Maria Von Trapp, Rhonda Fleming, Art Linkletter, Tom Netherton, Col. James Irwin, Elvin Hayes, and many others including Tim Foli, Hank Snow, Norman Vincent Peale, George Foreman, Dean Jones, Bobby Allison, and Mother Angelica. None of these people either "appeared" in person on the special or commented specifically on the investigation--they only appeared in a montage of PTL Club program flashbacks. The entire montage lasted only 30 seconds.

To summarize, the critic examining Jim Bakker's rhetorical strategy under investigation must realize (1) Jim Bakker is PTL, (2) his rhetoric is directed toward his Partners, and (3) the very nature of the FCC inquiry demands the locus

of rhetorical study shift from a religious to a corporate realm. An item analysis reveals Jim Bakker relies upon a strategy of diversion and deception in persuading the PTL Partners to dismiss the allegations prompting the controversy and concentrate instead upon their role as Bakker's Partners as defenders of the Faith.

While the FCC has yet to determine if PTL has violated any fund-raising regulations, Bakker's strategy has already succeeded. Contending his enemies, the press and the FCC, do not understand fundamentalist Christian values,[17] Bakker has persuaded the Partners that the values of serving God's Will as revealed through His messenger (Bakker) and defending religious freedom rank higher on their axiological hierarchy than obedience to the laws of men, i.e., FCC regulations.

This critic believes Bakker's rhetorical strategy, although endorsed by his target audience, is unethical. In answering the question posed by Wayne Minnick, "What are the consequences, intended or otherwise, of a given persuasive message?,"[18] I hasten to point out two disturbing implications: first Bakker is creating a closed society of significant power; and second, in so doing, he is impairing the efforts of other ministries by fostering distrust among Believers and non-Believers alike.

The elements characteristic of a closed society are present in PTL: a leader acknowledged as blessed by the Deity and possessing ultimate power and control; a group of fiercely devoted followers who permit their Leader free exercise of his influence; a cause--to follow the Will of God as revealed to the leader; a territory to defend--Heritage USA and Heritage Village; and finally, an enemy, the Devil at work through the guise of any person or organization perceived at cross purposes with their own.

The Partners believe in Bakker. PTL's popularity is growing and contributions continue to swell. Bakker has succeeded in convincing the Partners of their

inevitable triumph over the evil forces working against them through the FCC, and has induced the faithful to relegate PTL's original mission of evangelizing the world to a status secondary to the objective of completing Heritage USA, his vision of a Christian total living center. In essence, PTL is curtailing its function as an outreach ministry, preferring instead to build an earthly kingdom: a vacation land and retirement community for middle and upper-class, white, conservative Christians.

Jim Bakker's persuasive strategy is not only a vital element in the creation and maintenance of a closed society, but may diminish the credibility of other ministries in a society already calloused by enumerable Elmer Gantrys. Several Christian leaders and evangelists, including Billy Graham and Pat Robertson, no longer endorse PTL or schedule appearances with Bakker. No doubt with the influence of Bakker, among others, in mind, Graham warned the National Association of Evangelists and the National Religious Broadcasters, "a lack of financial integrity on the part of one of us can hurt the whole of the evangelical cause. . . . We must have the highest standards in morality, ethics, and integrity if we are to continue to have influence."[19]

In conclusion, similar to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company and its "500" radial tires, the Hooker Chemical Company and Love Canal, and other corporations who for business reasons refuse to offer public apology when embroiled in social crisis, PTL staunchly refuses to admit error, whether intentional or inadvertent. On a recent PTL television special kicking off a $100 million campaign to finish construction of Heritage USA, Jim Bakker never mentioned the FCC or foreign missions. Instead, savoring the near completion of his financially troubled promised land, Jim Bakker boasted, "We're rubbing the Devil's nose in it."[20] To the contrary, the noses being rubbed belong to you, me, the government, and, most tragically, the Partners, whose trust he has violated.

END NOTES

[1]The Charlotte Observer, July 9, 1978.

[2]_____, January 18, 1979.

[3]Ibid.

[4]_____, July 9, 1978.

[5]_____, February 16, 1979.

[6]_____, July 9, 1978.

[7]_____, November 17, 1979.

[8]_____, June 22, 1980.

[9]_____, March 20, 1979.

[10]Ibid.

[11]"Under Investigation," a television special produced by the PTL Television Broadcasting Network which appeared February 12, 1980, on WCCB Channel 18 in Charlotte, NC.

[12]The Charlotte Observer, March 20, 1979.

[13]_____, April 1, 1979.

[14]"Under Investigation."

[15]The Charlotte Observer, December 5, 1979.

[16]_____, January 13, 1980.

[17]"Under Investigation."

[18]Wayne Minnick, "A new Look at the Ethics of Persuasion," The Southern Speech Communication Journal, XLV (Summer, 1980), 354.

[19]Billy Graham, Speech at the National Association of Evangelists and the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, Washington, DC., January 28, 1981.

[20]"Building Together," a television special produced by the PTL Television Broadcasting Network which appeared June 28, 1980, on WCCB Channel 18 in Charlotte, NC.